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WINE IS KING

By Mike Stepanovich

The evidence is inescapable. Drive over to Paso Robles from Bakersfield on Highway 46 one of these days and you'll see it, too. Winemaking is on the grow!

As you get to Shandon, a few miles west of where highways 46 and 41 converge, you see them — the hillsides covered with vineyards. They continue for miles as you drive west toward Paso Robles.

You pass a giant grape fountain that has occasionally in the past spewed purple water — much to the amusement of locals and tourists alike — surrounded by new vineyards. You look over the rolling hills and all you see is vineyards. Continue on Highway 46 west, past Paso Robles, and the proliferation of new wineries is astonishing.

Susan West, marketing manager at Eberle Winery and formerly with the Paso Robles Vintners and Growers Association, just shakes her head at the frenetic growth that has pushed Paso Robles to the state's third largest wine region behind only Napa Valley and Sonoma County.

"I remember when we hit 30 wineries in the PRVGA," she said. "We were delirious. In 1997, we had 29 member wineries. In 2000 we had 32. In 2003 we had 70, and today we have at least 76 — more than double what we had just three-and-a-half years ago."

And that doesn't count the 10 or so wineries that aren't members of the PRVGA, including Rabbit Ridge, Zin Alley, Caparone and Saxum. Throw those wineries into the mix, and the Paso Robles area has nearly 90 wineries now. Toss in the couple-dozen wineries in the Edna Valley-Arroyo Grande Valley region south of San Luis Obispo, and the county has well more than 100 wineries.

The scary thing, West said, is the number of wineries yet to open. "Right now there are 40 wineries in San Luis Obispo County with their permits pending," she said. "It's unbelievable."

Statistics compiled by California wine historian Bob Thompson, the PRVGA and the California Agricultural Statistics Service in an attempt to show just how dramatic the growth has been. In 1970, Paso Robles had zero white-wine grapes planted, and only 417 acres of red wine grapes, 402 of them zinfandel. In 1993,

San Luis Obispo County had 8,454 acres of wine grapes. Today, in just the Paso Robles area, more than 30,000 acres are planted

to wine grapes. And only he's considered the number of people including not what Gary Eberle created in 1997, but the fact that this is the first time in the history of the wine industry that there were vineyards planted in that area just north of the

"Now visitors to the area are finding that Paso Robles is a very friendly place, that when they visit a winery they're likely to find the winemaker behind the bar. The small boutiques are coming in their own. We're now becoming a bonified destination, not just a place to buy gas."

The area has also benefited from good press — major national wine publications have provided critical acclaim — and major investments — industry giants E&J Gall Beringer-Blass Wine Estates, J. Lohr and Peak Wines International have either developed major vineyards in the area or purchased wineries.

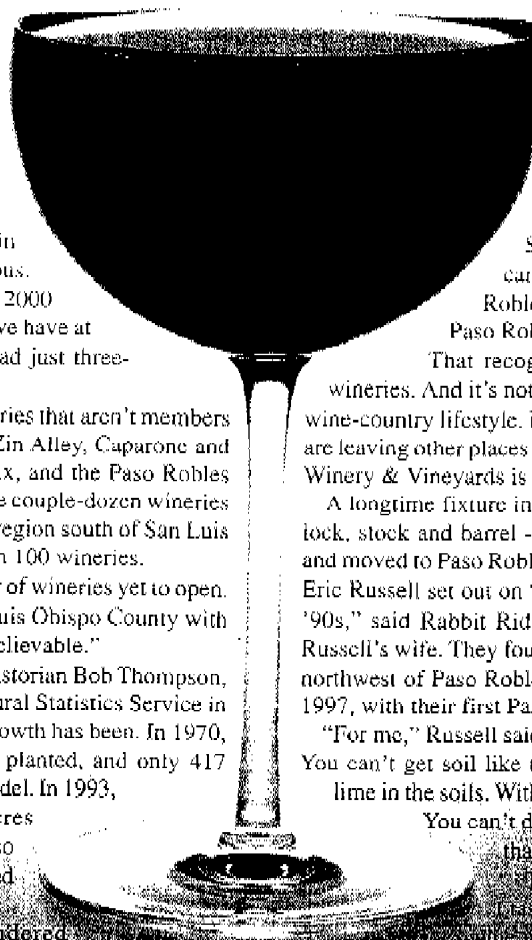
Bill Sheffer, former winemaker at Eberle Winery, and now a consultant in Europe, attributed the growth to a couple of things. "Truthfully, we're a good grape growing area, and still a reasonable place cost-wise to establish something. Napa and Sonoma are ludicrously expensive. But you can make a good living making wine in Paso Robles. It's just a great place to be. Every year Paso Robles gets more and more recognition."

That recognition is clear from the number of new wineries. And it's not just newly minted vintners looking for the wine-country lifestyle. It's also coming from existing wineries that are leaving other places to set up shop in Paso Robles. Rabbit Ridge Winery & Vineyards is one such winery.

A longtime fixture in Sonoma County, Rabbit Ridge packed a truck, stock and barrel — except for a remaining tasting room — and moved to Paso Robles about five years ago. Owner/winemaker Eric Russell set out on "a mission to find a new home in the mid '90s," said Rabbit Ridge President Joanne James Russell, Eric Russell's wife. They found 700 acres on the West Side, a few miles northwest of Paso Robles. They planted the property in 1996, 1997, with their first Paso Robles vintage in 2000.

"For me," Russell said, "when I came down here, I realized you can't get soil like this in Napa and Sonoma. In Napa, you lime in the soils. With ours, you don't need it."

You can't duplicate this soil in any other place. It's just what you need to make the best wine. It's just what you need to make the best wine. It's just what you need to make the best wine.



The growing conditions in the Paso Robles area are also exceptional, he said. "We have some of the most unique microclimates anywhere in the world. ... I knew that this was a place that was going to take off."

And so much has changed in the eight years since he came, Russell said. "It's like Healdsburg (in Sonoma County) was 15 years ago. Nice people are coming in, investing in the region."

And the planting going on is huge, he said. "The other significant development is the planting on the West Side. There are a lot of small vineyards that will knock people's socks off, and can compete with the best in the world."

Wineries with a history in Paso Robles are coming to that conclusion as well. Adelaida Cellars, also on Paso Robles, West Side, started out in 1981 on the East Side, but then-owner John Munch migrated to the west in 1988. Subsequently the Van Steenwyk family purchased the winery in 1991, eventually marrying it to the legendary Hoffman Mountain Ranch vineyard in 1995, (it was first planted in 1963 by Dr. Stanley Hoffman and has been rechristened HMR Estate Vineyard in deference to Hoffman who has not owned the vineyard for some years and prefers that his name not be associated with it), and the later-planted estate Viking Vineyard, established in 1990.

Both of those Adelaida estate vineyards are examples of Russell's observation about microclimates: although HMR Estate and Viking are in close proximity, HMR is cooler and produces excellent pinot noir, while Viking is warmer, and produces quality cabernet and syrah. Recognizing the potential for world-class vineyards, Adelaida is also looking to expand its plantings, taking advantage of both the ideal microclimates and the calcareous soils, marketing director Paul Sowerby said. "We're developing a new vineyard site on a hilltop across from Viking," he said. "It's 14 miles from the ocean as the crow flies, so has that marine influence, but at 2,000 feet is also very sunny."

He said the winery is also using special rootstock from France that is the highest limestone-tolerant rootstock known. The goal is to produce 15,000 cases a year from exclusively estate vines, Sowerby said. "We'll consider buying fruit from other sources, but only if it matches our quality, and that's hard to find."

While the West Side has experienced the biggest explosion of wineries, most described as "small, family-owned," the East Side is not without its advocates or its share of the

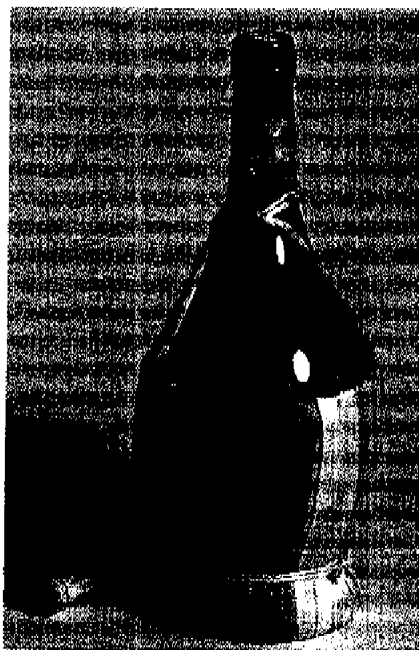
growth. One such winery is Chateau Margene, at the far southeast corner of the Paso Robles appellation, a boutique winery specializing in cabernet sauvignon.

Owner/winemaker Mike Mooney said he sees pluses and minuses to the growth. "We've seen the town evolve with the addition of Wal Mart and Home Depot. What attracted us to this area, was the small-town feel and lifestyle," he said, a quality that is diminished when "the big boxes" stores such as Wal Mart and Home Depot arrive.

But the symptoms of the growth are there.

People are finding out what Gary Eberle knew in 1972: it's a great area to grow grapes"

Susan West - Eberle Winery



"We do see traffic problems in town now," he said. "We're also seeing a glut of wines. The younger generation is being priced out from Paso Robles. Housing has gone up dramatically. In San Luis Obispo County, the median price for a home is more than \$400,000. I hear about people moving out because they can't afford to live here. The north county has become a much more significant economic impact on the rest of the county. The north county is where there's room to grow."

A native of Ventura County, Mooney said he hopes the same kind of aggressive growth that has hit Ventura County doesn't occur in

the Paso Robles area. "We would prefer to see it stay the same as it was," he said, something he considers unlikely as he anticipates that by 2005 Paso Robles will have more than 100 wineries.

Although he worries about the effect of the rapid growth, he acknowledged there are some benefits. The growth "is bringing new restaurants, more tourism, bed-and-breakfasts — that side is very positive," he said. "But I hope we never become Napa Valley with all its traffic problems. I think the people in Paso Robles have a more down-to-earth mindset. For me it's a better lifestyle."

What does all this mean for Bakersfield residents? For one thing it means that world-class wineries are less than two-hours away. Justin Winery's '97 Isosceles was named the eighth-best wine in the world by a national wine publication a few years ago; Linne Calodo was given a pair of 95s by renowned critic Robert Parker, L'Aventure has earned critical acclaim, Eberle Winery routinely hauls away top prizes from international wine competitions, Victor Hugo is producing splendid wines, and Tobin James Cellars is quite simply the most popular tasting room on the Central Coast and arguably in California.

For another it means variety — with a burgeoning Paso Robles wine scene locals can find a wide array of wines from the always popular cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay to zinfandel, petite sirah, syrah, viognier, sauvignon blanc, pinot noir, roussane, cab-syrah blends, Rhone blends, barbera, nebbiolo, sangiovese, and others. In fact 45 different varietals are grown in the Paso Robles appellation, according to the PRVGA. And the wines don't cost an arm and a leg. Since Paso Robles doesn't yet have the cachet of Napa and Sonoma excellent wines are easily found in the \$10-\$30 range.

"The wines in Paso Robles I think are every bit as good as the wines in Napa and Sonoma," said local wine aficionado Klaus Hoepfer. "They're making some wonderful wine there, and they don't cost \$120 a bottle either. I'm looking forward to what's happening over there in Paso Robles — the wines measure up with anything in the state. It's great news for Bakersfield wine lovers." ♦

Oops...

We inadvertently identified the photos in Summer 2004 Life is a Cabernet column as Chuck Ortman and Gary Eberle. The caption should have read Matt Ortman and Chuck Ortman.